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MUSICAL MASTERY

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MYTEK MAKES A BETTER BROOKLYN? HAVE WE GOT A BRIDGE TO SELL YOU!

Karan Acoustics LINEa preamplifier

by Alan Sircom

It has become a cliché in audio circles to claim 'there are no good preamplifiers'. Fortunately, there are exceptions to the rule and they are increasing in number. Ten years ago, the number of really good preamps could be counted on the fingers on one hand, and a hand that had a bad fight with a combine harvester at that. Today, they number in the double-figures. The Karan Acoustics KA L Reference was always one of the contenders, but that didn't prepare us for the LINEa, Karan's latest and greatest top-of-the-line preamplifier.

The LINEa is the first in a new Master Collection from Karan, the whole collection a reflection of 30 years of Milan Karan's outstanding range of amplifiers. A second, one box line preamplifier, a two-box statement and one box ultimate phono stage, stereo and mono power amplifiers will follow, each establishing themselves as the definitive Karan statement in that field of amplification. That would be a bold statement from any brand but given

Karan's ability to already make 'world-class' products in any amp sector, these models have a lot to live up to. Judging by the LINEa, however, that's not going to be an issue.

The Master Collection is a worthy product line to show off Karan's 30 years of quality amplification; the products are a distillation of the best of Milan Karan's engineering smarts developed both before and during his time with the brand that bears his name. The circuit is made using the best components, and what constitutes 'best' is more than just a trawl through a Who's Who of famous names in the electronics business ▶



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▶ and is instead an iterative process of laboratory measurement and listening test evaluations for all the active and passive components in the LINEa circuit. This even comes down to using different thickness copper traces for different stages of the circuit; 120µm for the power supplies, and 75µm for the amplifier sections of the LINEa.

Naturally, a company that works out performance differences in circuit traces takes the same almost obsessive care throughout every aspect of design. Attention is paid to the topology and isolation properties of each circuit board. Where components are not exacting enough to meet Karan’s demanding standards, the manufacturers have been tasked with building to the company’s proprietary specifications. In terms of the circuitry itself, the LINEa is driven in pure Class A with no global feedback in order to reduce or even eliminate intermodulation distortion.

Moreover, the LINEa is fully balanced from front to back. Although many domestic audio components claim a symmetrical circuit, often this is little more than lip service. This Karan amp, by way of contrast, is fully differential and

DC coupled, with any potential DC offset resolved in custom DC servo circuits instead of putting capacitors in the signal path. There are two RCA inputs alongside the four XLRs and one of the two XLR outputs (shown in the photographic sample) is now also a single-ended RCA pair. The topology remains as complementary as it gets and this means noise, distortion and other interference are kept even and therefore low, cancelling out signal by-products. Of course, this degree of circuit symmetry is for nothing if there’s a pinch-point in the volume control, but even here, the output level of the signal (volume control) has been designed as a 4x fully balanced and symmetrical attenuator with ▶



“What you hear through the Karan is a resonant, breathing, percussive instrument, played by a master.”



ultra-fast relays and custom made, non-magnetic resistors of 0.1% tolerance. The result is a preamplifier that is linear to within +0/-3dB from 1.5Hz to 3mHz, while the LINEa's extremely fast and DC coupled circuits guarantee no phase shift of the audio signal or any time aberration within the full audio bandwidth. Even by the obsessive levels often found in audio, this raises the bar.

The stepped front fascia is replaced by a curved panel, which is both easier on the eye and less likely to be a source of resonance. The top plate has a gradated series of holes for heat dissipation and the Karan logo inset, which also looks more elegant than existing Karan products. The front display layout and graphics are subtly changed; simply removing the second smaller 'acoustics' line in the logo gives the Karan name cleaner lines. The remote handset pebble is more substantial. Even the feet get their own place in Karan history. Most companies would just think 'feet', but Milan Karan researched, listened and ultimately selected the excellent (and *Hi-Fi+* Award Winning) CS21.0 CenterStage2 feet by Critical Mass Systems.

I try not to be swayed by the first impressions, especially when dealing with the sort of top end equipment that often unveils its story over time. But here, it was impossible not to be won over by the LINEa from the get-go. The first track I played – Andreas Schiff playing the *Apassionata* from his Beethoven piano sonata cycle on ECM – it was clear I was in the presence of something special. The piano – a notoriously difficult instrument to get right, both at the recording and replay ends – has the percussive impact and the decay and sustain of a piano in the room, but with the fluidity and 'legato' coherence needed to realise that piano sound. What you get in most cases is the sound of fingers tapping keys and hammers hitting strings; what you hear through the Karan is a resonant, breathing, percussive instrument, played by a master.

Detail is, of course, paramount here. But it's only one of the benefits to the Karan sound. There's something akin to making thematic sense of the music that's really hard to describe, but it's as if the performance is better honed and more nailed down. It's as if one of the already finest pianists of his generation just got a little more practice in before the recording. Everything is a little more polished and precise. The piano too snaps into focus. It's a very dynamic, extremely natural presentation, but one that portrays the 'spaces around the notes' brilliantly.

This track gets a lot of play time, but I noticed something close to a velvet effortlessness and smoothness to the sound that is not commonly heard. At first, I thought the LINEa was being a little too smooth, but the more I listened to other tracks, it was just that it was getting so far past the surface sonic performance and getting to the heart of the recording itself.

Oddly, this resolved itself by an abrupt shift to 'Afterglow' from Lydia Ainsworth's *Darling of the Afterglow* [Bella Union]. This

“I feel the Karan Acoustics LINEa is perhaps the most approachable and universal of the ultra-preamplifiers.”



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Line-level solid-state preamplifier

Inputs: 4× XLR balanced, 2× RCA single-ended

Outputs: 1× XLR balanced, 1× RCA single-ended

Input Impedance: 30 kOhm (balanced/unbalanced)

Output Impedance: 90 Ohm

Output Level: 1.55 V/RMS (nominal), 18.0 V/RMS (maximum/balanced/600 Ohm load)

Max. Input Level: 5.4 V/RMS (balanced/unbalanced)

Gain: 6db (9db with internal adjustments)

Frequency Response: 20Hz-20kHz, ±0 dB;

Distortion: 0.003% (Full output, 20Hz to 20kHz)

Signal to Noise Ratio: >120 dB (unweighted)

Dimensions (W×H×D):

504 × 126 × 390 mm (Main control unit and Power supply unit)

Weight: 16.2kg (Main control unit), 17.1kg (Power supply unit)

Price: £29,000

Manufacturer: Karan Acoustics

URL: karanacoustics.com

UK Distributor: Audiofreaks

URL: audiofreaks.co.uk

Tel: +44(0) 208 948 4153

- ▶ slow, almost chanting trip-hoppy electronica couldn't be more different to solo piano, but the way the LINEa unveiled the processing on her voice and the synth sounds filling the room showed both how 'angular' the processing, but also how refined her voice was underpinning all that synth modelling.

There was a sense of precision to this sound that permeated every track played; from acoustic Rolling Stones to Choral music, and even to the old and rather shrieky sounding Vivaldi Four Seasons by Marriner and the AMSF [Argo]. This is a record many of us have been able to maintain a love/hate relationship over the years, thanks on the one hand to perhaps what is the best playing of Vivaldi, on one of the worst recordings. Curiously, the Karan manages to sidestep the bad and focus on the instrumentation and the musicianship. Moving to more modern classical recordings again, the preamp's ability to put you in the same room as Joyce DiDonato in her *Stella di Napoli* album [Erato] explains it all, as you are left speechless and breathless at the scale of her singing, as if hearing it anew.

There's a category error made by some, in thinking that because well-recorded acoustic instruments in a live space is an audiophile Gold Standard, that's all good audio can do. However, the same goose-bumps moments apply equally to everything from electronica to hard rock, too. Of course, to fully realise that goal, you need a preamp as musically honest as the LINEa.

I feel the Karan Acoustics LINEa is the perhaps the most approachable and universal of the ultra-preamplifiers. That could have gone one of two ways; the preamplifier that the highest of high-end respected... as they were buying another preamplifier, or a preamplifier that carves out its own niche as the best choice for the widest number of listeners. I can't help but think

the LINEa ticks that second box brilliantly. If a £29,000 preamp could be called 'the preamp of the people', the Karan Acoustics LINEa is that preamp! +